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SUBJECT: BRITISH SUPPORT FOR AFGHANISTAN WAR DROPS ON EVE
OF U.S. DECISION

11. (U) Summary: The murder of five British police trainers by a rogue Afghan officer, the unsatisfying conclusion to the Afghan election, public challenges to UK policy by leading politicians, and a wave of wrenching television interviews with grieving family members this week combined to dampen British public opinion on Afghanistan. According to one poll, Britons believing UK troops should be withdrawn immediately has risen from 25 to 35 percent over the last two weeks. Against the backdrop of a Labour government down in the polls and President Obama's widely covered deliberations on the McChrystal report, commentary from leading media is increasingly skeptical on the war. Some key editors are hinting that their publications, hitherto strongly supporting the war, are on the verge of turning around. This same group is closely watching the debate in the U.S. End Summary.

Hard Numbers

12. (U) Three separate recent polls, all showing increased public opposition to the war, have received extensive media coverage this week. Two of the polls compare data month to month, while the third gives a snapshot of public opinion. The most recent poll conducted by ComRes/BBC on Nov 4-5 found that 64 percent of the public think the war is unwinnable. This compares closely to a poll conducted by YouGov/Channel 4 on the same dates which found 57 percent think victory is not possible. The ComRes/BBC poll also found 63 percent believe British troops should be withdrawn as quickly as possible. This is a 21 percent increase over the 42 percent of respondents calling for an immediate pullout in a July 10-11 Guardian/BBC Newsnight poll. The YouGov/Channel poll found a lower figure of 35 percent calling for immediate withdrawal, but that is a 10 percent increase from the same poll conducted just two weeks earlier. A third poll, conducted by Populus/Times and focusing on British voters in mid-October, found that 36 percent believe British troops should be withdrawn immediately, an increase of seven percent from their poll in mid-September. Because this poll targets voters, it is likely to resonate strongly with politicians in the run-up to the May 2010 general elections.

Editorial Support Eroding

13. (SBU) The war in Afghanistan has long been viewed as "the good war" by the editors of Britain's leading publications. Some have quibbled over the execution of the war and support offered to troops, but The Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Economist, The Sun and The Daily Mail have all, until recently, held the editorial line that NATO should be in Afghanistan. But recent events have shaken their certainty. Reporting and commentary over the weekend show that Prime Minister Brown's quickly organized speech at the Royal College of Defence Studies (11/6), in which he spelled out the UK's reasons for continuing in Afghanistan, did little to shore up support. The speech was followed by a

session in the House of Lords where three former defence chiefs criticized Brown for providing insufficient support for the troops in Afghanistan. The next day, Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond called for a reassessment of the UK's role in the war, including "the possibility of withdrawal." The Sun has reversed its earlier support for the Brown government and is running articles sharply critical of the government's prosecution of the war, as is the Daily Telegraph. An editor from the Economist told an embassy official last week that opinion at the Economist on Afghanistan was "on a knife's edge," heading from positive to negative.

¶4. (U) The Independent, who said on 11/7 that the case for withdrawal was not overwhelming, changed its mind last weekend and wrote on 11/9 that "It is time... for a change in policy. It is time to say that this war is ill conceived, unwinnable and counterproductive. It is time to start planning a phased withdrawal of British troops." Peter Beaumont, the Observer's foreign affairs editor wrote on 11/9: "Why are we fighting in Afghanistan? I ask because I am no longer sure. And not being sure, like a majority of Britons, I cannot conceive what victory might look like. That makes me think we should not be there." The commentary was balanced with a piece in favor of remaining written by Jason Burke, the paper's expert on Al Qaeda. Still, Burke's call for continued engagement is not likely to resonate with the UK public: "...we have in place the strategy that we should have had years ago... But will this strategy work? Probably not." Max Hastings, one of the UK's most respected conservative commentators, formally called for a UK withdrawal in an editorial in the Daily Mail on 11/6

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entitled, 'An Unwinnable War.' Hastings had previously called for an increase in troop levels to support NATO's objectives.

Media Says Whitehall Looks to Washington

¶5. (U) The continued policy review in Washington is seen by some commentators as contributing to a sense of drift. The Daily Telegraph warned on 11/6 that the absence of a clear strategy from the U.S. is threatening the mission, creating increasing frustration in Whitehall, and hampering HMG's attempts to maintain public support for an increasingly unpopular conflict. The Guardian (11/7) reported that, "Across the alliance, unhappiness within the mission is palpable. The longer Obama ponders, the stronger political and public opposition is likely to grow." The Times reported that Brown's speech at the Royal College of Defence Studies came, "amid increasing impatience among British defence chiefs and diplomats at President Obama's slowness in deciding a new tactic for Afghanistan."

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